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ON PAGE C-15

THE WASHINGTON POST
12 April 1982

JACK ANDERSON

Argentine Move May Be Warmup For Antarctica

The Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands may be a warmup for a future assault on Antarctica. But next time, U.S. toes may be tramped on.

Secret CIA documents point out that the conditions that led to this month's Argentine aggression in the South Atlantic apply even more strongly to Antarctica: (1) a reported abundance of oil; (2) the desire to divert the public's attention from domestic strife; (3) a longstanding legal claim; and (4) national pride.

The CIA papers give this background on the Falklands furor: An oil-thirsty Argentina hopes "to lay the basis for a claim to oil deposits believed to exist near the Falklands" and, at the same time, to create "a useful diversion from domestic turmoil."

According to the CIA, a British research team, attracted by the scent of oil, made a foray into Falkland waters in 1976. As the British approached the islands, "a series of intercepted naval communications [indicated that] an Argentine destroyer sought to halt the British research

vessel Shackleton near the islands and threatened to fire into its hull when the Shackleton refused to comply."

This incident on the high seas was a prelude to today's British-Argentine showdown over the Falklands. Explains the CIA: Argentina has "refused to recognize British sovereignty over the Falklands, and the century-old dispute has been made worse by Argentine suspicions that [the British have been exploring for] oil deposits in the area."

There have been similar tensions over the Antarctic. Relates the CIA: "Overlapping claims of the United Kingdom, Argentina and Chile at the Antarctic peninsula [have] sparked much political heat and, at least once, even gunfire."

The United States, which explored the frozen continent in the 1820s, has more right than the other claimants to the Antarctic. But instead of claiming the land, the United States sought to mediate the dispute and persuaded the rivals to sign a 1959 treaty temporarily setting aside their claims.

Nevertheless, Argentina has continued to assert sovereignty over a portion of Antarctica and has bolstered its claim by performing marriages and flying pregnant women there to give birth to Argentine citizens on the disputed territory.

Secret White House documents also point out that "Argentina geographically dominates the ocean routes between the South Atlantic and Pacific Oceans Were the Panama Canal not operable or available, or in the event of a protracted war, this route would have a high strategic importance"

My associate Dale Van Atta, who recently visited Antarctica, found that Argentina has been forceful in pressing its territorial claims. The Argentine junta has been stimulated no doubt by the discovery of rich oil and mineral deposits on the icy continent.

Given the same incentives that led to the Falklands adventure, the Argentine generals may eventually decide to occupy the Antarctic peninsula, intelligence sources suggest. Any such move would have to overrun a permanent U.S. base staffed by scientists.

The secret White House papers urge "a concerted diplomatic effort to reach some agreement with Argentina Such an effort could possibly head off what otherwise might become a divisive [issue] which would adversely affect the excellent U.S.-Argentine cooperation in Antarctic research and logistics, or might have even more serious consequences for our relations."